

SMOKING AND ADOLESCENTS

At a time when smoking among adults is decreasing in popularity, it is increasing among adolescents and teenagers. Young smokers grow up to be adult smokers, and in many cases, die of smoking-related diseases.

Every day, an estimated 3,000 teenagers begin smoking. According to the Surgeon General, in the lifetimes of those 3,000 teens, 60 will die in traffic accidents, 30 will be murdered, and 750 will die from smoking-related diseases.

Nearly 85 percent of all smokers say they started smoking before age 18. Studies show that the younger a person starts smoking, the more likely they are to become heavy smokers and to develop smoking-related diseases, such as cancer and emphysema.

It is estimated that 3.1 million adolescents smoke. It is most common among high-school seniors, of whom, one in four admits to smoking — even though in most states, Missouri included, it is illegal to sell tobacco products to minors.

Cigarette smoking is seen by some prevention specialists as a “gateway drug,” a substance that leads to the use of other drugs. This is because smoking is seen by many adolescents as an act of defiance of authority and often takes place in groups where other acts of defiance also take place.

▼ Cancer and cardiovascular disease

Burning tobacco produces hundreds of chemicals, many of them harmful to humans when inhaled into the lungs. These include tars and nicotine. These chemicals are believed to cause genetic damage to cells, leading to cancer.

Inhaling cigarette, cigar, or pipe smoke also damages the cardiovascular system, leading to heart and respiratory diseases. In all, about 434,000 Americans — more than 10,000 of them from Missouri — die each year from smoking-related cancers, heart disease, and respiratory diseases.

Tobacco smoke contains tar, which is known to cause lung cancer and bronchial disorders. An average cigarette contains 15 mg. of tar. A person who smokes a pack of cigarettes per day inhales about eight ounces of tar each year.

The nicotine in tobacco smoke causes chemical changes in the smoker’s brain, making the smoker addicted to tobacco and making it difficult to break the smoking habit.

▼ Second-hand smoke

Also at risk are those who live or work in an environment where others are smoking and where they are inhaling the smoke secondhand. It is estimated that more than 50,000 people die each year from heart diseases alone caused by breathing second-

hand smoke.

Especially vulnerable are children, even before they are born. Pregnant women who smoke are more likely to have babies with low birth weights. Smoking by one or more parents also is suspected as one cause of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Children who live with one or more smoking parents have higher incidences of asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, pneumonia, and influenza. They also have more colds and respiratory infections than children who live in smoke-free homes.



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Sources: *Toward a Tobacco-Free Missouri;*
Journal of the American College of Cardiology, August 1994.